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AUTHOR Brownlee, Geraldine D.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The Truants' Alternative and Optional Education Program was developed to provide preventative, interventive, and remedial services to keep students from becoming chronic truants, and as an educational option for students who had dropped out or who were at risk of dropping out of school due to academic deficiencies. The program, implemented in the 1988-89 school year in Chicago, consists of three components: the Cooperative Learning and Counseling Program, the School/Community Attendance Improvement and Dropout Reduction Program, and the Centers for Alternative Reentry Education Program. Contained within this document are an evaluation of the program and recommendations for its improvement. The evaluation was based on data collected through observations and interviews (a total of 152 interviews) conducted at every program site. Detailed are each of the three program components' original goals, convergent themes observed in collected data, and recommendations for improvement. The findings of the study indicate that most of the proposed objectives have not been obtained; however, the effect of a funding reduction on nonattainment of proposed outcomes cannot be overemphasized. Despite this, the program appears to be conceptually sound and is worthy of consideration as a systemwide model. (KM)

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SUMMARY

AN EVALUATION OF ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS FOR HIGH SCHOOL TRUANTS

Geraldine D. Brownlee, University of Illinois at Chicago
Geraldine Outlaw, Loyola University, Chicago
Jack Mitchell, Chicago Public Schools
Jacqueline H. Simmons, Chicago Public Schools
Frauline Y. Miller, Chicago Public Schools

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THE PURPOSES OF THE EVALUATION

The purposes of this evaluation are to determine the effectiveness of the on-going FY88 Truants' Alternative and Optional Education Program; to inform school staffs, District officials, interested citizenry, the School Board, and the Illinois State Board of Education of the evaluation study findings; and to make recommendations concerning the program. Embedded in the concept of this evaluation are: (1) the discovery of what has worked in each of the program components, so that the results can be repeated and expanded; and (2) the identification of inconsistencies which exist between the proposed program plans and the program as implemented so that problem-solving techniques can be used to remedy weaknesses resulting from such discrepancies. Reporting on program effectiveness will be documented by: (1) setting forth the program components and the evaluation design and limitations; (2) presenting -- school by school, objective by objective -- analyses of the data which were submitted as corroborating evidence; (3) describing observational information on program component sites, materials, and activities; (4) describing interviews with school staffs and students; and (5) reporting summative evaluation findings and conclusions.

Program Goals and Components

The program goals were to provide (1) preventive, interventive, and remeditative services to keep students from becoming chronic truants; and (2) educational options for students who had dropped out of school and for students who were at risk of dropping out due to severe academic deficiencies -- particularly in reading comprehension. Three program components were

planned to accomplish the goals: (1) the Cooperative Learning and Counseling Program; (2) the School/Community Attendance Improvement and Dropout Reduction Program; (3) the Centers for Alternative Re-entry Education Program.

Evaluation Limitations

As for the limitations which affected the conduct of this study, it is undeniable that the historic delay in the opening of the school year not only reduced the time allocated to FY88 program implementation, but also, predictably, had some affect on the enrollment or re-enrollment of the program target student populations. Moreover, the discrepancy between proposed staff positions and funded staff positions, in combination with the impact of the unprecedented, post-strike Chicago public school reform movement; affected school staff, staff assignments and, in turn, program implementation and the evaluation design and process. Furthermore, albeit the decision to move from internal evaluation to external evaluation was a deliberative one, and inter-institutional agreements were reached, understandably, actual evaluation time on task was reduced further by this change.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The current literature in educational evaluation which emphasizes the complexities of teaching and learning and the need for a more comprehensive picture of program effects through the use of multimethod, multiperson, and multivariable approaches to data collection were given strong consideration in determining how to conduct the evaluation study. Even in the face of the aforementioned limitations of the evaluation it was decided that it was important to add depth to the information gathered, to allow for greater

sensitivity to the sources of documentation, and to provide better insight for a newly acquired principal evaluator. Consequently, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used -- while taking care not to minimize the importance of the quantitative approach. Moreover, the use of the two approaches was in keeping with the Evaluation Action Plan of the proposal.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Through interaction with the school program personnel about the presented evaluation plan -- program component by component, objective by objective, activity by activity -- plans for data collection were made. This included: (1) setting data submittal dates; (2) identifying, by roles, the program persons responsible for data and information submittals; (3) reaching consensus on minor changes in several objectives; (4) and drafting forms which were to be refined by the evaluator and sent to program staff for submitting information in a manageable format.

Descriptive analyses of data have been reported in Tables, by school, by program, and by program component objectives. [Refer to the Addendum for contents in complete Evaluation report.] Regression analysis was used to explore relationships among the variables in the objectives and program activities such as attendance, grades and parent contacts; and multiple regression analysis was used to explain the effects that attendance, grades, and parent contacts have on one another.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative method used to collect data were observations and interviews at every program site. Albeit time was a constraint on the conduct of the evaluation, a method was selected that would create order from the disparate array of qualitative information which had been collected and would make it possible for linkages to be made between the qualitative data collected and the quantitative results. The method used was: (1) search for convergent themes in the interviews and similarities among the observations, and having done this; (2) determine what qualitative information fitted the reported quantitative data; (3) determine what information did not match the reported quantitative data; and from that which matched and mismatched (4) draw explanations about what had worked in program implementation and what inconsistencies between the proposed program plans and actual program implementation may have affected program effectiveness.

The Cooperative Learning and Counseling Program

This program component was designed to provide: (1) language arts and mathematics peer-tutors at a ratio of three students to one tutor for a maximum of 125 students per school, as the students continued with regular classroom instruction; (2) re-enforcement/recognition activities; and (3) peer-counseling, monitoring, and referral service for identified "at risk" freshmen and sophomore students. The proposed school program staff was: two teacher specialists, a counselor, and a teacher aide. The proposed objectives of the program were:

- By June 30, 1988, the number of participating students receiving satisfactory grades (A, B, C, or D) will increase by at least 25 percent.
- The number of students receiving failing grades "F" in English and mathematics will decrease by 30 percent as measured by improved report card grades compared to first and second semester performance.
- Eighty percent of student participants will improve in at least two of the following areas: academic performance; discipline referrals, attendance.

The quantifiable data submitted on the **Cooperative Learning and Counseling Program** indicate that among the ten high schools, one met the enrollment objective and a second one attained the objective on improvement in grades. Further analysis of the reports on the grades and attendance of the program students found that the grades of the previous semester have more affect on the grades of the current semester than do absences, although absences have some affect.

A total of 72 interviews were conducted at the ten school program sites. The convergent themes about the program which are not consistent with the proposed program implementation plans and, which may explain weaknesses in the program and hence account for the nonattainment of the objectives are: (1) cutbacks in program funding for counseling; (2) insufficient time to recruit, train, and supervise tutors; (3) scheduling problems for tutoring services; (4) absence of an established formal communication system among nonprogram staff and program staff concerning the target population; (5) nonacceptance of the definition of "truant" and "chronic truant" by school personnel; (6)

nonavailability of instructional materials as this relates to the perceived commitment of administrators and boards.

However, the students viewed the program and the program staff positively, which explains what has worked in program implementation that is supported by the data submitted on attendance status.

The School/Community Attendance and Dropout Reduction Program

This program component was designed to prevent and to remedy attendance problems of "at risk" students, by meeting their personal and family needs. The needs would be addressed by: school-wide inservice training, parent involvement, educational incentives and support programs, counseling sessions, and health and social service resource intervention. The proposed school program staff was: a teacher attendance specialist and a school attendance aide. The proposed program objective was:

. By August 1988, a maximum of 200 "at risk" ninth and tenth grade students will have improved their school attendance by 10 percent as compared to their percent attendance of the previous school year.

Quantifiable information reported on program implementation in the **School/Community Attendance Improvement and Dropout Reduction component** indicates that implementation of the program objectives is underway, but that none of the program's objectives have been met. Furthermore, analysis shows that parent contacts had no strong relationship to Semester II grades nor to Semester II absences. However, there was a significant positive association between attendance and credit earned. That is, the higher the number of days in school, the more credits earned by students. Moreover, another finding

revealed that Semester II grades and Semester I absences were a strong predictor of Semester II absences.

A total of 56 interviews were conducted at the thirteen program sites. The convergent themes, which are not consistent with the proposed program implementation plans, which match the quantitative data reported, and which may explain nonattainment of the objectives and program weaknesses are: (1) the definition of "truant" and "chronic truant" needs review; (2) the late start-up time limited program efforts to the school site and reduced the opportunity for linkages to community and agency supportive resources and (3) insufficient program staff.

The Centers for Alternative Reentry Education Program

Known as C.A.R.E., this program component was designed to provide educational options by offering a flexible, modular twelve-month instructional program, intensive counseling, job readiness skills and concepts, and employment assistance to students who had dropped out of school or were at risk of dropping out. To meet the individualized needs of the targeted students, four center sites in three high school districts were proposed to accommodate 100 students per site. Each Center was to be staffed by a program manager, four teachers, one counselor, a school aide and a school clerk (3 for 4 sites). Proposed program component objectives were:

. Provide an optional education experience that would allow at least 75 percent of the students to return to traditional high schools, graduate from C.A.R.E. or transfer to other educational programs; i.e., G.E.D.

. Involve at least 80 percent of participating students and their parents in counseling sessions conducted by staff before June 30, 1988.

. Conduct an instructional program that focuses on the following outcomes: at the end of a ten-week period, 80 percent of students will achieve the number of credits for which they contracted and maintain an 80 percent attendance rate during that time.

All centers met the attendance and enrollment objectives and one center met the optional education experience objective. A total of 24 interviews were conducted at the four program sites. The students viewed small class-size and individualized instruction positively. Other convergent themes from the interviews were: (1) more teachers are needed to cover the content areas; (2) more counselors are needed to permit linkages with business and community resources (3) use non-school program sites to avoid negative stereotype by regular students and (4) add a site-based social worker to address the personal, emotional, and family problems of students. It may be deduced then, that 100 percent of the objectives would have been met if the convergent themes had been realized.

Limitations of the Data

The quantifiable data reported on the **Cooperative Learning and Counseling Program** and the **School/Community Attendance and Dropout Reduction Program** fall far short of representing the implemented program components, in that, except for reports on student status, there are few instances when more than fifty percent of the schools provided information and when more than fifty percent

of the listed program students could be matched with the grades and attendance information that was submitted. Consequently, conclusions reached in this evaluation are not generalizable and require caution in interpretation. Nonetheless, some of the void in quantifiable data has been filled by qualifiable information gathered at interviews and in observations that were made at 100 percent of the school and program sites and from a sampling across all school staff roles and program and non-program students.

Recommendations, by Component

The Cooperative Learning and Counseling Program:

- Adopt more experimental approaches such as: (1) in ninth grade, where possible, schedule teachers to go to more classrooms to teach students rather than have students move to the rooms of teachers for every class period; and (2) teachers in the upper grades of the feeder elementary schools who are qualified to teach through ninth grade transfer to the general high schools of their graduates, on a rotating basis, as exchange teachers with qualified high school teachers. The notion is to enhance the retention of ninth grade students by creating for them a more "elementary-like" high school transition; and by giving high school teachers elementary school experiences and elementary school teachers high school experiences, to assure understanding of high school-bound students and their past and new environments.
- Implement incentive plans for peer tutors.
- Assign teacher specialists in English and mathematics to each site to develop and implement a formalized structure for recruitment, instruction, and supervision of peer tutors.

- Assign a program counselor to each site to develop and implement a formalized structure for recruitment, instruction, and supervision of peer counselors.
- Plan and conduct school-wide program orientation and regularly scheduled school-wide program staff development.
- Structure formalized academic collaboration/coordination with nonprogram staff for program planning and implementation.
- Design and implement an experimental Stanley Kaplan Program component.

The School/Community Attendance Improvement and Dropout Reduction Program:

- Plan and conduct school-wide program orientation and regularly scheduled school-wide staff development.
- Provide an appropriate office equipped with a telephone for use by the attendance specialist.
- Restore an attendance aide to assist the attendance specialist in home-school contacts and in monitoring attendance and related responsibilities.
- Increase Field Office-based staff for coordinating and administering the parenting adolescent program.
- Plan creative, cultural, and instructional student incentive programs rather than have isolated events.
- Increase extracurricular activities for a mix of program and nonprogram students.
- Plan and implement a summer transition to high school program for eighth grade graduates and their parents.

The Centers for Alternative Reentry Education Program:

- Increase the number of teachers in the required content areas to (1) permit more flexible scheduling, (2) speed up the return of program students to more traditional settings, (3) offer a broader curriculum in the content areas, and (4) increase tutoring opportunities.
- Provide the needed instructional materials and instructional supplies.
- House all center programs in non-school sites.
- Assign a site-based social worker skilled in assisting students to meet their personal, emotional, and family needs and to assist in student staffing.
- Adopt the parent network concept as a program activity at all sites.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

A recommendation across all program components is that another system for quantitative data collection be put in place for the FY89 program evaluation. [Refer to the Addendum for action that has been taken to improve the FY89 data collection.]

A second recommendation is that leadership at all levels affirm the concept of evaluation as a systemic means to improve attendance and grades by involving staff in program evaluation. Such behavior will enable staff to view evaluation as a professional task which is to be learned and assumed.

In sum, the findings of the evaluation study to determine the effectiveness of the FY88 Program indicate that most of the proposed objectives have not been attained. However, the affect of the reduction in funding on nonattainment of proposed outcomes can not be overemphasized, in that the proposed objectives were not modified to match the decrease in

funding. An over-riding illustration of this is that no adjustments were made in the proposed numbers of students to be served, albeit the actual funding, necessarily, resulted in reduced program staff and instructional materials. Notwithstanding, the stated outcomes, from the outset, may have been too ambitious. This is not intended as a negative observation inasmuch as this tends to happen, and frequently, because of the motivation, expectation, and vision for improvement that the writers and implementers have and the need to assure funding. Nonetheless, analyses of the quantifiable data, the convergent themes of the site interviews and the site observations support continuation of the program, because of two significant findings: 1) the positive relationship between attendance and a successful academic experience as evidenced by grades and 2) the positive influence that past grades have on present grades. These findings replicate the literature on student learning, and most important of all, suggest that the program is conceptually sound and worthy of consideration as a systemwide model.

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ADDENDUM

FY88 Summative Evaluation Meetings with Principal Evaluator

FY89 Program Implementation Meetings with Principal Evaluator

September 13, 1988	Field Administrators Board of Education Evaluation Research Staff
October 5, 1988	District Superintendents, Principals, Program Staff, Field Administrators
October 25, 1988	Program Staff Computer In-service Training
November 15, 1988	Field Administrators, Principals, Program Staff

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	iv
PURPOSES OF THE EVALUATION	1
THE PROGRAM	1
Program Background	1
Program Goals and Components	2
Cooperative Learning and Counseling Program	3
School/Community Attendance and Dropout Reduction Program	4
Centers for Alternative Reentry Education Program (C.A.R.E.)	6
Evaluation Limitations	7
EVALUATION METHODOLOGY	9
Evaluation Design	9
Quantitative Data Collection	11
Quantitative Data Analysis	12
Qualitative Data Collection	12
Qualitative Data Analysis	14
EVALUATION FINDINGS	14
Quantitative Results	15
Qualitative Results	29
On-Site Interviews	29
On-Site Observations	35
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	38
Recommendations, By Component	40
General Recommendations	42

LIST OF TABLES

		Page
1.	Student Enrollment and English Grades Reported for Fall 1987 and Spring 1988, By School	15
2.	English and Math Grades, By School	16
3.	Percent of Students Improving in Grades and Attendance, By School	18
4.	Mean Pre/Post-test, ACT Composite Scores, By School	19
5.	Reported Student Status	20
6.	Enrollment and Submitted Attendance Reports, By School	21
7.	Reported Rate of Absences, By School	22
8.	Reported Attendance Status, By School	23
9.	Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory Mean Scores	24
10.	Enrollment and Frequency of Reported Grades, By School	26
11.	Credits and Absences, By School	27
12.	Near End of Program Status Report, By School	28
13.	On-Site Interviews, Cooperative Learning and Counseling Program	29
14.	On-Site Interviews, School/Community Attendance Improvement and Dropout Reduction Program	32
15.	On-Site Interviews, Centers for Alternative Reentry Education Program	34